Bruno Was From Brazil

"I'm from Oakland and I'm not a statistic. Yet. But New Year's Eve I left the Bank of America at 2:30 pm; the news that night flashed on my bank. It was the scene of the last homicide of the year, at 3:20 pm.—, which meant I dodged a bullet by 45 minutes. Witnesses say two Latino males and two African-American males had a parking lot altercation. The Latino driver used an ethnic slur and one of the black guys pulled out a gun and shot him. The two blacks drove off, witnesses say, and Bruno who was from Brazil and delivered pizza, for god's sake, died on the spot...now you know the last word in the guidebook for new arrivals is nigger. Ask Camille Cosby. And I know poor, poor Bruno heard the word a thousand times delivering those pizzas. 'Some nigguz on 90th Ave. want mushroom/salami/chicken...only nigguz want combos like that...you my nigga... when you get money from nigguz, check for counterfeit...nigguz, Bruno, watch out...' Poor Bruno, the word probably came off his tongue like spit. And he didn't know you could call a black person a nigger and get utter scorn and contempt. Like down South where they just ignored it and kept their inner dignity. But Bruno, you don't call a real nigga a nigga. That's like a death wish. Are you crazy? Suicidal? Certain words are like gods. They command respect. Nigger is a god. I'm so sorry for Bruno. He was a sacrificial lamb—that's what you have to do with gods. You have to appease them, give them a lil' somepin somepin. And I know Richard Pryor went to Africa after he made $50 million off the word and came back with religion. Stopped using the word and used crack instead. But he didn't stop folks from using it. He just made the word an academic issue: shall we nigger; shall we not nigger? Forget Dick Gregory's autobiography called *Nigger*. No, a Harvard law professor writes a book called *Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word*. Nigger is a God, nigger made millions, now it has a career. And the country's leading black intellectual, a guy named Skippy, finds one of the first novels written by a black, titled, what else, *Our Nig*. So I'm proposing a constitutional amendment on the use of the word. There are simply days when it is dangerous to use the word. And one of those days is Friday night. And another of those days is Saturday night. Ok? On MLK's birthday, abstain. Christmas, it goes without saying. The season is the reason. And proceed with caution on the Fourth of July. Fireworks, drinking and the use of the word by the wrong people don't mix."

Critique by Jendi Reiter

This month's unusual and provocative piece, "Bruno Was From Brazil" by Judy Juanita, crosses the boundaries of genre (appropriately for a poem about explosive cross-cultural interaction). An example of the fluid form known as the prose poem, which has become increasingly popular in literary journals, this piece would also work well as a slam poetry performance. Neither form can rely on line breaks to signify that the text is "poetic", forcing the author to pay closer attention to aural patterns and timing in order to give the piece the musical momentum and intensity of a poem. Writing prose poems, or reading one's work aloud, are both useful tools for free-verse poets to discover whether they are allowing line breaks to substitute for true poetic speech.

What exactly is a prose poem? This overview from the Academy of American Poets website notes: "While it lacks the line breaks associated with poetry, the prose poem maintains a poetic quality, often utilizing techniques common to poetry, such as fragmentation, compression, repetition, and rhyme." Juanita's poem fits this description, with its staccato sentences, its wide-ranging associative leaps between topics and varieties of diction (news reports, conversation, academese and slang), and especially its mesmerizing repetition of That Word.

"Bruno Was From Brazil" initially leans toward the prosy side of the equation, beginning in the voice of a hard-boiled detective story: "I'm from Oakland and I'm not a statistic. Yet." Halfway through, somewhere around the line "Certain words are like gods," the piece takes off as a manic riff on racially charged language and whether its sting can ever be dulled by context. Without line breaks (brakes?), the words spill out furiously, defying decorum and step-by-step logic, so that when we finally reach the author's satirical "solution" of a constitutional amendment, it's obvious that we'll never be able to draw neat lines separating safe from dangerous uses of the word. In this way, the author's chosen form enhances the message and emotional impact of her story.

The hybrid poetic form liberates Juanita to include sentences that would feel too wordy and technical in a traditional lyric poem (particularly the section from "Forget Dick Gregory's autobiography" to "Our Nig"). Other sentences, by contrast, display more of the aphoristic, non-literal qualities of poetry: "now you know the last word in the guidebook for new arrivals is nigger"; "Stopped using the word and used crack instead"; and the passage "Certain words are like gods. They command respect. Nigger is a god. I'm so sorry for Bruno. He was a sacrificial lamb—that's what you have to do with gods. You have to appease them, give them a lil' somepin somepin."

The repetition of the word "god" parallels the subsequent variations on "nigger", reinforcing the connection between these concepts. Gods are lethally unpredictable, a power that we try and fail to contain with words and rituals, and yet a power we can't resist invoking to make sense of our lives. This poem suggests that racial and cultural identity, and perhaps even language itself, are essential aspects of being human, but also have the potential to dehumanize. Where there are borders, there will be wars.

The latter half of the poem seems to deride academic efforts to domesticate the word, implicitly questioning whether this is just another way of encouraging children to play with live ammunition. The line between safe and unsafe contexts is easy to cross unawares; wouldn't it be better to suppress the word entirely? On the other hand, how can we think and speak critically about real and persistent racial divisions if we allow racist language to silence us? Neither speech nor silence can perfectly preserve the illusion of a vantage point outside the moral failures of our culture. By choosing to use the word—to rub our noses in it, in fact—but ending with a self-mocking non-solution, Juanita makes us see that cosmetic changes to language only conceal racism, not eliminate it.

Adding to the moral ambiguity, "nigger" is a word traditionally used by whites to oppress blacks, but the homicide victim in this poem is a Latino immigrant who used the word in ignorance, and his assailants are African-American. Who is truly innocent here? The shooters, or men in their social world, might have felt they were resisting oppression by putting a positive spin on a word that the white majority used against them (the way some gays have reclaimed "queer"), but clearly the word still hurts them, no matter how tough they try to become by using it on each other. It's like keeping a loaded gun in your house: all it takes is one curious child to turn responsible self-defense into irresponsible risk.

Some interesting postmodern themes that arise in this piece: "Bruno Was From Brazil" is a poem about language that points to its own inadequacy, yet cannot be silent. It's also about the disjunction between signifier and signified. Repeat a word often enough and it starts to sound strange, almost nonsensical. Abstracted from its interpersonal context, the word as word reveals itself to be empty, arbitrary. Yet this can lull us into a false sense of security, because of course the interpersonal context is always there, and the word in the real world always has a history and an explosive charge. The author, the speaker, is not in complete control of how the word will be received. Is it "just a word"? Yes—and no.